

Joshua

And
The Land of Promise

by

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CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

EVENSONG

(Joshua 24)

“Whensoe'er it comes
That summons that we look for it will seem
Soon, yea, too soon! Let us take heed in time
That God may now be glorified in us!”
- H. Hamilton King

ONCE more the veteran leader, who was soldier, judge, statesman, and prophet combined, desired to see his people face to face. His meeting with their representatives was therefore followed, almost immediately, by a gathering of all the tribes of Israel to Shechem; where years before they had stood together in solemn convocation, whilst from the heights of Ebal and Gerizim had rolled the Amens of the people in answer to the blessing and the curse.

The stones on which the law had been written were still clearly in evidence, and the whole scene must have come vividly back to the memory of the majority of those assembled. But from that moment the valley would be associated specially with this touching farewell scene, in which Joshua uttered his last exhortations and appeals.

JOSHUA'S NARRATIVE

He told again the wonderful story of Israel's past; beginning where God began, with their fathers in their native land beyond the Euphrates, in the dim dawn of history. What a far-traveled look was that to Terah, the father of Abraham and the father of Nachor!

The reference was possibly intended to give him the opportunity of emphasizing the fact that there the family was as much addicted to idolatry as any of the peoples around. This sin was, so to speak, indigenous to the soil of Israel a weed which would crop up, unless the utmost care was exercised against it.

Look, O Israel, to the hole of the pit whence ye were hewn; ye were not originally one whit better than others. God did not choose you for any distinguishing trait of monotheistic fervor, but because of his sovereign grace. This alone has made you to differ. Ye were dead in trespasses and sins; but in His mercy, for His great love wherewith he loved you, He chose you for his own.

Isaac, Jacob, Esau - names which made the deepest chords vibrate in his hearers hearts were successively recalled in the deep hush that had fallen on the vast assembly. Then the speaker, acting as the spokesman of The Lord, reached more familiar ground, as he recalled names and events which had played a part in his own wonderful career the mission of the two brethren; the plagues of Egypt; the cry and deliverance of the Red Sea; the wilderness; Balak, son of Zippor, and Balaam, son of Beor; the passage of the Jordan; the fall of Jericho; the overthrow of the seven nations of Canaan; the possession of their land.

But throughout the story, the entire stress is laid on the grace of God. **“I took;” “I gave;” “I sent;” “I brought;” “I destroyed;” “I gave;” “I delivered.”**

Not a mention is made of Israel’s mighty men. All is attributed to the ultimate source of nature, history, and grace the supreme will of God. We cannot get beyond that. However many links we interpose between ourselves and the causes of things, ultimately we are shut up to acknowledge the determining counsel and foreknowledge of God. The Christian cannot improve on the creed once formulated by the great heathen monarch: **“He doeth according to his will in the army of Heaven, and among the inhabitants of the earth; and none can stay his hand, or say unto him, What doest Thou?”**

There is nothing more salutary than to stand on the eminence of the years in life’s golden evening and review the way by which our God has led us. The far-away home, where faces glimmer oat in the daybreak of life’s morning, on which we shall not look again till the veil of eternity rends; the hard bondage of early life; the many straits and deliverances; the guiding cloud of the pilgrimage; the daily provision for incessant needs; the human love; the goodness and mercy which have followed all our days.

Ah me! what a romance lies behind the meanest life, of sin and forgiveness, of provocation and pity, of grace and gift! Not one of us that shall not hold his own history to be the most wonderful of all when we exchange experiences in that land which we shall not get by our own sword or bow, dwelling in mansions we did not build, eating of vineyards and oliveyards we did not plant.

JOSHUA’S APPEAL

It would appear that the people largely maintained the worship of household gods, like those which Rachel stole from Laban. This practice was probably perpetuated by stealth. But the germs of evil were only awaiting favorable conditions to manifest themselves, and Joshua had every reason to dread the further development of the insidious taint.

The human heart is always so willing to substitute the material for the spiritual; and where the idol takes the place of God, man forfeits the only antagonistic force strong enough to counteract the workings of his passion.

Thus in every nation under Heaven idolatry has sooner or later led to impurity. Therefore, with marked emphasis, Joshua appealed to the people to put away the gods which Terah and others of their ancestors had served beyond the river, and those which they had vainly invoked in the slave-huts of Egypt. He did this first at the close of his address (14), and again just before the memorable interview closed (23).

The work of idol-renunciation runs parallel with our deepest experiences in the blessed life. Even John, at the close of his first Epistle, bids his disciples keep themselves from idols. In fact, it is only as the clearer light of Heaven falls upon us that we come to see the true nature of many things which we had counted innocent, and hugged as dearer than life. We may choose death once for all in some solemn hour of consecration, but we only gradually come to learn all that it involves. Self is our greatest idol; and it is so ubiquitous, so insidious, so protean! Scotched in one place, it breaks out in another. It clings and twines about things which are innocent enough in themselves, but which it transforms into idols, and then they have to be put away. Our Isaacs! our Rachels! our right hands!

Our only hope is to be strong in our choice of God. The negative destruction of self is unsatisfactory. We must deliberately set ourselves toward God. Our will must crown him. Our soul must make him first. Our life must be subdued to the least syllable of his command. If thou wouldst do this, peace would come to thee.

“If it seem evil unto you to serve the Lord, choose you this day whom ye will serve; whether the gods which your fathers served that were beyond the river, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land ye dwell: but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.”

I. THE PEOPLE’S FIRST REPLY

They professed that they had no desire to forsake The Lord and serve other gods, They freely acknowledged that they owed everything to him from the exodus to the possession of Canaan. They also expressed their determination to serve the Lord.

JOSHUA’S ANSWER

Whether they uttered all these vows in thunderous unison, or by the mouth of chosen representatives, or whether the historian gathered up thus the consensus of their feeling as it passed from lip to lip, we cannot tell. But surely Joshua detected some traces of insincerity in their voice.

Perhaps he felt the unreality of their professions because they gave no sign of abandoning their strange gods. Had he hoped for a repetition of the scene that had taken place on that very spot so many years before, when at the challenge of Jacob his household gave unto him all the strange gods which were in their hands, and the rings which were in their ears, and Jacob hid them beneath the oak which was by Shechem? Did he expect that the leaders of the people would first bring out their contributions to a pile similar to that which, in Christian centuries, rose in the great square of Florence, at the summons of Savonarola?

But there was no such response. The people contented themselves with their affirmations, but made no sacrifices. There was no holocaust, and Joshua was deeply conscious of the unreality of profession that went no deeper than words. This, said he in effect, is no way to serve the Lord. He is a holy God; he is a jealous God. He will search out these secret sins of yours; he will not be content with the service of the lip; he will not pass over transgression and sin, even though they be hidden in the recesses of your tents and the depths of your hearts. Notwithstanding all the good that he has done to you, he will not pass over the declensions and backslidings of His people.

II. THE PEOPLE'S SECOND REPLY

They were full of self-confidence, and vowed, come what might, that they would serve the Lord. There was the energy of their own self-will, the strength of their own resolve, the persistent insistence on their choice of The Lord. Standing there with Joshua they forgot the many failures of the past, mocked at his fears, derided his suggestions of possible declension, and cried, "**Nay, but we will serve the Lord.**"

What a commentary on those proud words is given by the Book of Judges! Serve the Lord! The very first sentence which follows the record of Joshua's death in that book tells us that "**the children of Israel did that which was evil in the sight of the Lord, and served Baalim; and they forsook The Lord, the God of their fathers.**"

And this record recurs with melancholy monotony on nearly every page. We are reminded of that other scene when beneath Sinai, burning with fire, the people pledged themselves to do all that the Lord had spoken; and within six weeks were worshipping him under the form of a calf, with lascivious dance.

In point of fact, resolution, however good and however strongly expressed, is not sufficient to carry us forward into a life of obedience.

Our moral nature has become so weakened by repeated failure that it is not able to resist the appeals of sense. To will is present with us, but how to perform that which is good we find not. No one can look thoughtfully into the workings of his own nature without realizing the terrible paralysis which has befallen it. The will sits amid the vassals of the inner realm, issuing commands which it is not able to enforce, like a puppet-king in the midst of mighty chiefs who dispute his authority.

Thus it is that so often young hearts are embittered with disappointment, because in some high moment of resolve they determine that all life shall be new, inspired by constant resolve, and climbing with undeviating purpose the steeps of purity and devotion; but when they descend to the plain of commonplace, to the routine of daily life, they discover that the impetus has died away, and that the power to execute the high purpose of the soul is gone.

No; consecration is only possible when it is conceived, prosecuted, and consummated in power not our own, and in the energy of the Holy Spirit.

JOSHUA'S SECOND ANSWER

“Ye are witnesses,” he said, **“against yourselves, that ye have chosen the Lord to serve him.”** In other words, he appealed to them on the ground of their own asseverations, and sought to bind them to the vows they had made. Did he not intend to probe them deeper, to make them realize the solemnity of the occasion, to compel them to face the greatness of the responsibility they had assumed? By the magnitude of the interests involved, by the mercies and deliverances of God, by the memory of their ancestors, by the great days of Abraham and Isaac, by their own solemn protestations, he urged them to be true.

III. THE PEOPLE'S THIRD REPLY

“We are witnesses,” they cried; as in after days the people met Pilate's repeated challenge by the imprecation upon themselves of the Blood of Jesus. Alas, for their self-confident boast, for their headstrong pride of purpose! **“By strength can no man prevail.”** O my soul, be warned, that when thou art challenged as to thy resolves, thou makest thy boast in God; setting up thy banners in his name, entrenching thyself within the circle of his enviring Almightyness. Only by thy God canst thou leap over a wall, or run through a troop. Ask the Holy Spirit to bind thee by cords to the altar of self-surrender by the blood-red cord of Calvary; by the silver cord of hope in the second Advent; by the golden cord of daily fellowship.

JOSHUA'S RESPONSE

Further words were fruitless, and so he set up a memorial of the pledges by which the people had bound themselves. He wrote their words in the book of the law of God; and he took a great stone, and set it up there under the slab. **“Behold,”** said he, **“this stone shall be a witness against us; for it hath heard all the words of the Lord which He spake unto us: it shall be therefore a witness against you, lest ye deny your God.”**

Then he dismissed the people to their homes.

THERE IS COMFORT SUGGESTED TO US BY CONTRAST WITH THIS SOLEMN SCENE

Even in the Land of Promise the people introduced the old Sinaitic spirit of duty and obedience as the condition of their tenure. They had said at Sinai, **“All that the Lord says, we will do.”** And they said it again in Canaan. And we are all apt to make the same mistake. We once sought to justify ourselves by our own efforts, and now we seek to sanctify ourselves. Once we made resolutions to earn Heaven by good works; now we make them to maintain our vows of consecration intact. And directly we essay to tread the difficult path of sanctification in our own energy, and by our own might, we expose ourselves to endless misery and chagrin. There is no thoroughfare by this route. We cannot perfect in the flesh that which we began in the Spirit.

Joshua did not give the people rest. Had he done so, David would not have spoken of another day.

Canaan was only the type of the Sabbath-keeping of the people of God, but did not exhaust it.

At the best it was only a material and unsatisfying type. It afforded rest from the fatigues of the march, but not to the infinite capacities of the soul. The produce of cornfields and vineyards and oliveyards could not appease the appetite for the infinite that must have made itself felt even in the heart of Israel, as the nation settled in its God-given land. Therefore, as the Holy Ghost tells us, there remained over and above a rest which is open by faith to the people of God of every age.

Notice the deep spiritual truth here. Israel could not enter on the real rest of God, because the people persisted in introducing this talk about what they would or would not do. God's rest cannot be entered thus. Though it was the leadership of Joshua, it was the spirit of Moses. And the law can in no shape or form give rest. Is not this why so many Christians miss it still? They profess to be under the captaincy of the true Joshua; but they are all the while counting on their own resolves and boasting their own strength.

It is only when we apprehend the provisions of the New Covenant, which does mention man, but is full of the I wills of God, that we come into the true blessedness of rest and peace. Not what you do, but what God will do; not your bow and spear, but his right hand and his holy arm; not the energy of your good self, but the freeness of his grace. When you confess yourself powerless to maintain the attitude of consecration, and cast yourself helplessly on him to perform all things in and through you, realizing his ideals, and fulfilling his purposes, and when the entire burden is relinquished, and you are content to work out in the strength of his Spirit what he works in, will you experience the fullness of that rest which is deep as God's, like the azure sky that slumbers behind the bars of gold which incase the glory of sunset.

His task ended, Joshua retired to his inheritance; but the influence of his character and life was felt as long as he lived, and afterward. At last he died, one hundred and ten years old, and they buried him. All Israel probably gathered to pay homage to his memory. He richly merited all the honor that he received. He had none of the gifts of Moses. He may be compared to the man of two talents, whilst his great master was dowered with five. But he was strong and wise and true to the great trust committed to his care by the people and by God; and amid the stars that shine in the firmament of Heaven, not the least bright or clear is the luster of Joshua, the son of Nun, the antitype of the risen and ascended Saviour, and whose worthiest epitaph, as written by a subsequent hand, is

JOSHUA,

THE SON OF NUN,

THE SERVANT OF THE LORD

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